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Jetnikoff, Anita (2008) 'So you're to blame!': reading the battle more critically.
Academic conversation/ review of Ilana Snyder's The literacy Wars.

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***The Literacy Wars*, Ilana Snyder**

Reviewed by Anita Jetnikoff

Let me begin with an anecdote. I take this approach first since this review is constructed as part of a conversation rather than a formal critique of a book. Secondly opinions and anecdotes have shaped so much of the literacy debate in recent years. My story is ‘true’, although I have no solid evidence to ‘back it up’. Since that did not seem to concern the ostensible ‘literacy experts’ endlessly quoting each other in the newspapers, about the demise of literacy, I’ll continue. At a recent party, I was introduced to the father of a young colleague. When I replied to his standard question, “So what do you do?” with, “I lecture in English Curriculum,” the undisguised contempt in his reply took me quite aback. “So you’re to blame!” he retorted, and sucked on his beer. This response, which I could not defend against the backdrop of loud party music, encapsulates the public perception of English and literacy teachers and academics. When public perception seems so skewed, due to the silencing of one side of the issue by the media, some redress is necessary.

The Literacy Wars defends the position of English and literacy teachers who have been effectively ‘beaten up’ in the media debate by silencing their viewpoints. As all good critical literacy does, *The Literacy Wars* fills in gaps and silences, by exposing what has been left out of the debate. Ilana Snyder’s book fills in the other side, not with counter opinions, but with arguments based on sound research. Substantive research has been consistently and conveniently neglected in much of the reportage of the ‘literacy wars’. Snyder exposes the paucity of substantive research evidence to support the ‘negative’ side, intent upon constructing a moral panic over ostensible ‘declining standards of literacy.’ The published attacks on literacy and English educators and academics have been vigorous if not rigorous.

The metaphor of war in the title is an interesting one, since dedicated educators emerge battle weary from the fray. It is not an even war, however, when heavy handed allies of incumbent politicians and the media join forces to blast the canon (and side arms of phonics, high-stakes testing and skill sets) against teachers on the front line. Most English teachers would agree that a reactionary return to the ‘old days’ of skills sets and the literary canon at the expense of new media, and popular culture relevant to our students’ lives will not equip our students to emerge as multi-literate, twenty first century citizens.

The book also discusses how federal funding is commonly tied to narrow approaches to early literacy. Snyder describes, for instance, the previous government’s call for a return to the compulsory teaching of phonics, as a panacea to an exaggerated literacy crisis. Importantly, this book provides a critical review of both qualitative and quantitative literature, such as the internationally recognised PISA data, which refutes that there is a general literacy crisis in Australia. It also provides a useful cautionary backdrop of international failures to address literacy concerns, such as reactionary curriculum initiatives deploying rigid, skills-based, literacy ‘packages,’ in England and the United States. The book does not shy away from discussing the particular literacy needs of Indigenous, low socio-economic and second language students and the research and debates surrounding gender and culture. It also

suggests it is easier to blame educators for literacy failure than to attribute it to any other social or economic causes, which the government might then have to address.

In the final chapter, 'Literacy fights back,' Ilana Snyder urges us to keep the literacy and national curriculum dialogue open and professional. It is certainly time for educators to speak back and to be consulted and heard. *The Literacy Wars* begins to redress the imbalanced literacy debate by providing a reasoned voice supported by substantive evidence. After war reconstruction can take place, and importantly, Ilana Snyder suggests a positive way forward, based on collaboration and negotiation through, 'serious, civil, open discussion and dialogue'.

This book will be very useful to me as an academic working with English teachers, but I think its readability gives it further reach. I will be recommending particular chapters to the pre-service teachers with whom I work, especially since it may equip them with some useful tools to cultivate informed positions on the contested terrains of literacy and subject English, which they are about to enter as educators. Most especially I will ask them to read the chapters on grammar, reading, gender, testing and curriculum. Since everyone who speaks English has an opinion on how it should be taught, I hope it will also be read by politicians and Jo/anne Public, especially the parent who blamed me singularly for a 'literacy crisis' that does not even really exist. Perhaps if that generation of parent had been educated to read more critically, the debate would be better understood by all.

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